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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000222

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OVIP](#) [IR](#) [SY](#) [AE](#)
SUBJECT: UAE PRIME MINISTER'S QUICK VISIT TO TEHRAN AND
DAMASCUS

Classified by CDA Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

REF: Doha 0136

¶1. (C) Summary: UAE Prime Minister, Vice President, and Ruler of Dubai Mohammed bin Rashid embarked on a sudden visit to Tehran and Damascus February 18, taking the Foreign Minister (an Abu Dhabi royal) in his entourage. Public explanations of the visit are benign and innocent, and we heard from official circles that a blunt message was to be delivered in both places; nonetheless, the fact that such a high level visit (albeit a short one in which he hit both capitals in one day) took place at all is untimely. The optics of the visit may overshadow the frank message we have been encouraging the UAE and its Gulf neighbors to deliver to Iran and Syria about the need for responsible behavior. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid (MbR) al-Maktoum, also Ruler of Dubai, made a high profile visit to Iran and Syria February 18. The most senior UAE visitor to Iran since the 1979 revolution, MbR met with Iranian President Ahmedinejad, accompanied by UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) and MbR's newly-appointed Deputy Ruler of Dubai (his son) Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid. (The traveling delegation also included Dr. Anwar Gargash, newly-appointed Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and recognized as one of the UAE's leading experts on Iran -- his family is of Iranian origin.) MbR also met with First Vice President Parviz Davoudi. Public statements in advance of the visit suggested that economic ties and general brotherly cooperation would be high on the agenda in Tehran, and that even the long-standing territorial dispute over the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs could be discussed. (Note: Press reports note that in 1992 MbR visited then Iranian President Rafsanjani, but at that time MbR did not hold his current senior UAE titles. End note.)

¶3. (C) With Dubai's deep and long-standing cultural and trade links with Iran, MbR is known for taking a much softer approach to Tehran than the leadership in Abu Dhabi, stating recently on a trip to Germany that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful and often citing the UAE's friendly ties with its much larger neighbor. He will no doubt be a welcome guest of the current regime in Iran and is not likely to carry the firm message that Iran's behavior is destabilizing the region. On the contrary, Iran's engagement with Dubai -- economic and otherwise -- is an important part of the prosperity in that emirate and will likely be encouraged by the visit. UAE annual trade with Iran, mostly focused in Dubai and the Northern Emirates and largely made up of re-exports, is estimated at well over \$10 billion (\$11.7 billion last year according to some reports with projections reaching over \$14 billion for the current year). An estimated 450,000 Iranians live in the UAE, mostly in Dubai (Iranians thus constitute over 10 percent of the total UAE

population). Given this level of economic and societal interaction, it is noteworthy that no sitting UAE prime minister has yet visited Iran.

¶4. (C) The fact that AbZ, a senior Abu Dhabi royal (who had apparently not mentioned these travel plans to a USG interlocutor in a meeting as recently as two days prior to the trip, ref A), is in the entourage lends an Abu Dhabi leadership imprimatur on the visit. Although AbZ himself might argue that his presence helps ensure that a direct and firm message is conveyed to Iran (as we have heard him suggest in the past), he is clearly a junior partner in the delegation and is not likely to represent the more strident Abu Dhabi viewpoint in meetings led by MbR. It is unclear what role Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), who generally takes a hard line on Iran with USG visitors and spends much energy preparing the national defenses, might have played in the decision to send a prime ministerial level visitor. President Khalifa's views are also unclear, although the UAE's ultimate decision-maker presumably approved the trip.

¶5. (C) MbZ's International Affairs Director, Yousef al-Otaiba, told us February 18 that MbR had one blunt message for each stop. For Iran: Tehran needs to engage with the international community and take UNSCRs seriously, as they have implications for others in the region; and, for Syria: political stalemate in Lebanon cannot be allowed to fester and devolve into civil war. Al-Otaiba offered no reply when reminded that the optics of a senior visit, and MbR as the messenger, was not likely to convey the firmness suggested in these positions.

¶6. (C) MbR's visit to Tehran is reportedly in response to an

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invitation relayed recently by the visiting Ali Akbar Valayati, advisor to Supreme Guide Ali Khamene'i; we do not know how long the visit might have been in the planning, yet presume there was more thought put into it than a simple response to a recent invitation. Prior high level visits include AbZ's January 2007 trip to Tehran and Ahmedinejad's May 2007 visit to the UAE (where he met with a warm reception on the heels of Vice President Cheney's visit to the UAE and delivered a strong anti-Western message to an audience of thousands at a Dubai sports arena).

¶7. (C) Topics discussed in Damascus seem similarly superficial, including cooperation and preparation for the Arab League Summit. Again, the message sent by the visit itself speaks louder than what was discussed. Bashar al-Asad was last in the UAE as an official guest in December, 2006; UAE President Khalifa -- again with AbZ -- visited Damascus in July, 2007.

¶8. (SBU) According to Iranian press coverage of the visit, MbR is quoted as saying that the Iran-UAE relationship is a good example for other regional countries and described Iran's nuclear program as peaceful. He reportedly said that foreigner's claims that Iran is a threat to regional states are false because countries in the region share a common history and background. The UAE press quoted MbR saying that: "The UAE is committed to fostering cordial relations with friendly and sisterly countries. My visit to Tehran comes within this context." He described his meeting with Vice President Davoodi as "fruitful" and "useful," particularly with regards to economic issues. Interestingly, there was no mention in either Iranian or UAE press reports of discussion of the three disputed islands, despite suggestion in the press before the trip that the subject would be raised.

¶9. (C) Comment: Engagement with all of its neighbors, to one degree or another, is a UAE tradition. This small nation tries to balance its many relationships to avoid offense to any that might return to haunt it in the future. Just as

Ahmedinejad's visit came on the heels of VP Cheney's visit here, this trip follows closely the visit of the President to Abu Dhabi and Dubai. As justification for similar visits in the past we have been told by AbZ that one can only send a firm message when one is actually talking. Further emphasizing the UAE's penchant for engaging both sides, we are periodically reminded by MFA colleagues that the four pillars of UAE foreign policy are: 1) balanced alliances, 2) conflict avoidance, 3) active diplomacy, and 4) working with international organizations.

¶10. (C) Comment continued: The surprise announcement of a visit to Iran and Syria comports with MbR's favored style of the big gesture. He announced a cabinet reshuffle on the eve of his departure, yet another MbR-esque maneuver that caught the public by some (but not total) surprise, was clearly coordinated behind the scenes with Abu Dhabi (yet leaving them with some plausible deniability as to its intent), and will be praised in the mostly Dubai-based local press as yet another masterful stroke in the nation's development. MbR's (and the UAE's) true intentions will take some time to decipher, but two key UAE motive in the Iran visit may be to:

1) make progress on securing the Iranian natural gas supplies the UAE needs to generate power to support its headlong development; and 2) to protect its equities and possibly gain leverage for movement on the three islands dispute. The UAE interest behind the visit to Syria, apart from balancing the UAE's many international relationships, is less apparent. Combining both countries in a single day trip suggests that the UAEG may see the two as politically linked.

End comment.

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